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Dam analysis ordered

Kevin Howell

Reporter

Resident concerns over whether flows through Oakdale and Norway Dams on the Tippecanoe River could have been better regulated to mitigate flood levels in January and February have reached the ears of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, FERC.

FERC became the licensing authority for the dams owned by Northern Indiana Public Service Company, NIPSCO, in September 2000 when the commission issued an order finding that the river is navigable and the Norway-Oakdale Hydroelectric Project is required to be licensed.

Although FERC representatives were not present, during recent flood meetings held by Federal Emergency Management Agency with representatives from Department of Natural Resources, NIPSCO, Indiana Department of Homeland Security, and other agencies, those concerns were raised by a number of flood victims.

Diane Talbot, with husband Lenard Miller and father-in-law Gene Miller, residents of Tippecanoe Ranch Road in Carroll County, attended that meeting.

"We didn't go to the meeting with that many questions about the dams, but several came up on the sort of preemptive management of the waters going through the dams," said Talbot.

"After a certain stage there is nothing that can be done but let water out, but early on when it looks like there may be some flooding issues then it seems worth looking into."

Home destroyed

On Jan. 8, Tippecanoe River waters crept up to within about an inch of slopping over the highest bank and running into the home of Miller and Talbot.

Their home was spared-barely-but last fall a second home a short ways downstream on the same road was purchased so the elder Miller could live nearby.

Located in a slightly lower elevation, it was overrun with about 4 feet of water, and essentially destroyed appliances and personal possessions. It was again flooded in February but the damage was already done.

The three residents attended the flood meeting held in Delphi to learn primarily about the ability to rebuild or repair the damaged home.

"One main question we had to get was the official statement about building permits and the ability to rebuild for the over 50 percent destroyed home," said Talbot.

"I had a pretty clear understanding that in fact until they passed the law, our property could not be rebuilt on or repaired - ever."

That is already changing with the passage of a bill by the Indiana General Assembly authored by State Senator Brandt Hershman that would allow a home like Miller's to be rebuilt or repaired if it was raised two feet above the designated 100-year flood level.

"I thought it stood a good chance of going through," said Talbot.

Now Talbot and the Millers will have to decide if rebuilding is financially feasible.

In the meantime, even though the dams are considered run-of-river dams and not intended for flood control, Talbot and others wonder if lake levels and flow rates through the dams could be better controlled to mitigate damage downstream during heavy flooding.

"There isn't anything anyone can do to guarantee there won't be flooding," Talbot said, "but it makes some sort of sense that the level the lakes are kept at routinely affects how much water they can absorb and can be released at a slower rate if thought of ahead of time."

According to FERC's order in issuing NIPSCO's license in October 2007, modifications to lake levels can be made "if required by operating emergencies beyond the control of the licensee, for short periods upon mutual agreement among the licensee, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (Indiana DNR) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), or under "abnormal river conditions" as defined below."

FERC notes that abnormal river conditions "shall be defined as conditions with river flows of 3,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) or higher, or hourly increases in river flow of 100 cfs or greater at both project dams."

Under those circumstances, the FERC order states, under "abnormal river conditions," as defined by river flow, the licensee shall at all times act to maintain the fluctuation of the reservoir surface elevation within 0.75 feet above (rather than 0.25 feet under normal conditions) and 0.25 feet below elevation (above sea level) 647.47 feet for Lake Shafer and 0.75 feet above and 0.25 feet below 612.45 feet for Lake Freeman."

Whether the allowed deviation from normal levels could help ease flooding, make it worse, or if further deviation would be appropriate, is something FERC is currently ordering NIPSCO to determine.

Analysis

"FERC is aware of the public concerns associated with flooding downstream of the Norway and Oakdale dams," said FERC spokesperson Celeste Miller.

"The FERC license allows the owner to suspend the normal operating procedures and limits during emergency situations such as floods.

"Given the limited size of the project reservoirs and the severe nature of the recent floods, however, the operation of the dams may not be able to reduce downstream flood levels."

However she said, FERC will monitor the situation and has required NIPSCO to submit an engineering analysis explaining the capability of the dams to mitigate natural flooding in the area.

"We have given NIPSCO a short time frame to submit the analysis but we are going to be flexible until they determine the full scope of the analyses they will have to accomplish," Miller explained.

"We want to be sure the analysis is accurate and that it fully explains the capabilities of the dams during natural severe floods."

For NIPSCO's part, the utility company is cooperating with the FERC directive.

"As a result of the two unprecedented floods in January and February, FERC has initiated a detailed analysis of the events and asked NIPSCO to provide information on the water flow and the Oakdale and Norway dams," said Colleen Reilly, director of communications and public affairs for NIPSCO.

"NIPSCO is cooperating fully with FERC in this study. We anticipate that FERC will release their findings to the public once the analysis is completed."

Once completed, the analysis will be available to the public on FERC's Web site, www.ferc.gov/. Click on eLibrary, scroll down and click on docket search. The docket number is P-12514.

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FEMA Outreach to Reduce Future Flood Damage

FEMA Mitigations specialists were out across Indiana Monday trying to help people make their homes more resistant to storms and flooding.

We caught up with one expert at the Wal-Mart in Elkhart.

He was handing out books and pamphlets urging people to do something now to reduce damage in the future.

Some of the preventative techniques he talked about were putting in French Drains, getting a subpump, and elevating a home.

Charles Michael, a FEMA Disaster Assistant says, "It's mainly commonsense. People who have gone through this say, 'If only I would've done this. If only I would've done that. Mitigation is about helping people so they're not damaged a second time under very similar conditions."

FEMA reps will be at many locations for several days in a row.

For more information on their times and locations, call FEMA's News Desk at 765-771-4643.

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